

THE SPIRITUAL ISSUES OF THE WAR

This bulletin is published for readers at home and abroad by the Religious Division of the Ministry of Information, London, to elucidate the spiritual issues at stake in the war, and to provide information concerning the British Churches in wartime, as well as their contribution to post-war reconstruction.

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1939-1945: THROUGH ENDURANCE TO VICTORY

Conviction and Restraint in Voices of Church Leaders at the Great Crises of the Struggle

Now that the European conflict is at last over, it is interesting and perhaps valuable to review some of the outstanding statements made by British Church leaders at the great turning points of the struggle. Other statements could, of course, be quoted, e.g. those on reconstruction, and we may have an opportunity of bringing these together in a later number of "Spiritual Issues". This particular group of quotations is chosen because they were made at, or in connection with, the great crises of the last five and a half years.

Outbreak of War, September, 1939

In the course of a united utterance, the Archbishop of Canterbury (Dr. Lang), the Moderator of the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland (Dr. Archibald Main), and the Moderator of the Free Church Federal Council (Dr. Robert Bond) said:

"At this solemn time we are moved to address our fellow countrymen, and especially those of them who are also our fellow Christians.

"Once again our country is at war. Bitter disappointment and distress must fill our hearts when we realize the terrible significance of these words. But we have not sought this war. It has been thrust upon us by the action of one man. On him alone lies the dreadful responsibility of having inflicted this crime upon humanity. It is needless to enlarge upon the motives and principles of his action. They are only too well known; and they have been laid bare by his wanton invasion of Poland. Suffice it to say that if

they were suffered to prevail all hopes of the settled peace and freedom from fear for which the peoples of the world are longing, all hopes of any international order based on justice and freedom would be banished from the earth. They are an assault upon all that Christianity means, or has meant, in the life of nations. It is, therefore, a supreme moral and, indeed, spiritual issue which is at stake. At all costs for the sake of the world's peace and order the policy proclaimed by the German Führer must be resisted and overcome.

"It is based on force. It must be met by counter-force. What this means must be hateful to any Christian man. But there is no other way—would God there were! The only effect of any appeal of non-resistance upon Herr Hitler would have been to encourage him to pursue his way with more ruthless determination. Thus, to use the words of our King: 'We can only do the right as we see the right, and reverently commit our cause to God.'

After a call to penitence and prayer, the statement concluded:

"There will always be one clear but difficult test of the Christian spirit. It is that, God helping us, however great the provocation may be and in spite of all the passions which war arouses, we shall refuse to give way to words or thoughts of ill will or hatred towards those who have been compelled to be our enemies. In relation to our fellow Christians among them we must endeavour to remember that fellowship in Christ, which, however sorely it may be broken, remains an abiding bond. This temper of spirit

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will help to prepare us for the task, which will come when the conflict is decided, of building a peace marked not by vindictiveness but by magnanimity and justice."

Dunkirk and After (1940)

In the presence of a great concourse of the nation at Westminster Abbey on the occasion of the National Day of Prayer (May 26th, 1940), the Archbishop of Canterbury (Dr. Lang) preached the sermon. Mr. Churchill and members of the War Cabinet were present. The Archbishop took as his text, "Lord, thou hast been our refuge from one generation to another." He said we were living in an hour darkened by greater dangers than had ever threatened our nation. Dr. Lang proceeded:

"However formidable, and indeed appalling, be the power of the vast machine of war which the ruler of Germany has been preparing for years for its malign purpose, man is always mightier than any machine. It will yet be proved that the spirit of free men is stronger than the subservience of men who are the mere cogs of the machine. Whatever losses or reverses may come, whatever sufferings may be in store, there remains the unconquerable soul. Here, too, on each single person lies a separate and inescapable responsibility—either to weaken or to strengthen the spirit of the nation. God helping us, we shall keep our spirit strong. . . .

"The mere act of prayer now and repeated continually day by day—of staying upon our God, of touch with the Eternal—will bring calmness, courage, self-control. It will keep our minds from being swayed about by rumours and our tempers from yielding to mere angry passions. It will sustain even now in the background of our minds an awareness of the other great call, which will await us when this tyranny of evil is overpast, to strive for a truly just, and, therefore, lasting, peace. More than this, prayer is the submission of ourselves to the will of God. Just as we have put ourselves at the disposal of our country, so in prayer we put ourselves at the disposal of our God. If this be done simply and honestly, even we, each one, may be found worthy of being His instruments in the fulfilment of His purpose."

In July of the same year the Archbishops of Canterbury and York issued a call to prayer in the course of which they said:

"The enemy is at the gate. A time of testing has come to this nation, more severe and searching than ever before in the long story of its life. How shall we meet the test?

"We can rely on the wonderful unity of the people. We can rely on the heroic courage of sailors, soldiers, and airmen, and on the no less heroic devotion of workers in coalmine and shipyard, in factory and field. But in the last resort it is upon the spirit of the whole nation, of every man and woman within it, that the issue will depend. The enemy knows this. His aim will be to break that spirit. He will try to spread fear. There is one power which can always overcome fear. It is faith—faith in God, faith that God reigns.

"Humbly but confidently we can commit our cause to Him. It must be in accordance with His Will that men should defend their land, their homes, their freedom. It must be in accordance with His Will that the evil powers now wielding a vast machine of war should be withheld, that justice, truth, mercy, freedom should not perish from the earth. Thus even in this anxious hour the summons comes 'Lift up your hearts.' Let the answer be 'We lift them up unto the Lord.'

Battle of Britain, 1940-41

We quote a typical statement from Dr. F. R. Barry (now Bishop of Southwell). His church and home at Westminster were destroyed in the blitz. He said: "Life in these parts has not been pleasant lately. We do not want to be pitied. London smashed about is a nobler city to-day than unscathed Paris. [This was a natural and typical comment at the time. After the great achievements of the Parisians at the Liberation, it would probably have been worded differently.—ED.] If its body is wounded its soul is unconquered. . . . Behind all the endurance and fortitude, which is becoming the hope of all free men, is the influence of that ancestral faith which has nursed and moulded the temper of our people. In every village and township in this country generation after generation, bred and brought up during a thousand years under the shadow of our ancient churches, has been taught to fear God and honour the King. That is why Britain to-day is invincible. Let us not be told—for it simply is not true—that the Churches have 'ceased to count' in national life. I would venture to claim that if, at this moment, all that the Churches are doing were eliminated, the defence of London could not be sustained."

Entry of Russia into the War, June, 1941

The late Dr. William Paton said in a broadcast "... We are not deceived. What little country that the Nazi power has en-

gulfed in these recent months thinks of the Nazi Government as the friend of Christian civilization? Do the Dutch or the Norwegians, do the Poles or the Czechs? Do the French Christians, who have been struggling so manfully to succour the many thousands of refugees from Central Europe still in their midst? Do the Swiss, whose country has been so deeply influenced by Christian and democratic principles? On the contrary, they know, as the evidence before our eyes tells us, too, that there has appeared in modern times no enemy of a genuinely Christian way of life so merciless, so subtle and so efficient in its brutality as the Nazi power. As my friends on the Continent know, I am no friend of Russian Communism; but it is not Russian Communists who are destroying the hopes of life and joy in the hearts of countless myriads of people, men, women and children, all over Europe to-day. It is not Communist Russia, but Japan, the ally of Nazi Germany, who is trying vainly to destroy the noble people of China, and Japan is buoyed up in her effort to commit successful piracy in the Far East by her belief that the Nazi power will help her. . . . We are not Bolsheviks because we fight Germany; we stand with all who will stand with us for ending a tyranny which first of all conquered Germany and now is trying to conquer the world."

Entry of America into the War, December, 1941

American support for our cause, the entry of America into the war and the subsequent co-operation in arms led to many expressions of friendship from Christian leaders of which the following, although not made until 1943, is typical. The speaker was the Dean of St. Paul's in an Independence Day Service held in St. Paul's Cathedral and broadcast to America:

"We have our memories. Every time we enter, the scars and injuries remind us of those dark days in 1940-41 when London was literally in the front line, and when we and our precious church stood in jeopardy every hour. We shall never forget those days and nights. But we remember, too, the sympathy and help which we had from you across the Atlantic in our dire need, and how we were supported by the prayers of very many of our Christian brethren on the other side of the ocean. There lies buried in our crypt an American airman who fell in the Battle of Britain, one of many who shared our dangers and helped our victory. I like to think

that to-day may be called not only Independence Day, but *Inter-dependence Day*, for surely the events of history are teaching us that we need each other. . . . Prophetic voices on both sides of the Atlantic are calling us to think of the more permanent foundations of unity.

"What are they? We have common ideals and standards of law and freedom. We agree in the main on the kind of civic life that we want. But there is something still deeper than this. When vast and tragic events shake the souls of men we become aware of the real roots of our lives. Those things which are admirable in our civilization have grown out of our fathers' faith in God and their attempt, often perhaps mistaken, but not unreal, to follow Christ and express His mind in human living. The word of God to us at this fateful hour is, I think, chiefly this: We have—our two nations and peoples have—a mighty destiny. God has laid upon us together the duty of leading the world into new paths of freedom, justice and peace. Only those who are humble before God, aware of their own sinfulness and weakness, can hope to be adequate for the task. But they may hope to fulfil God's Will, for He gives strength to the humble and courage to the single-minded."

D-Day, June, 1944

On the eve of the invasion of Europe the late Archbishop of Canterbury (Dr. Temple) said:

"We meet at a time when our nation is entering upon what is, we hope, the last phase of the war. Our prayer must be constant that no weakness in us may delay the victory of our arms and no selfishness in us hinder the establishment of truly righteous peace. We fight to throw back the aggression of a tyrannical foe and to end his tyranny. That is our first task. Force can render this service to the cause of human progress; it can check the damage to civilization that might be caused by force in the hands of evil men. That is itself a great thing and while the war lasts is our primary duty. But that is all that force can do; its function is purely negative. For all positive progress we must look elsewhere—to love of justice, to the spirit of goodwill, and to the self-discipline needed to make these effectual. As we seek God's help to sustain us in the conflict against the aggression of evil, let us no less seek His help to sustain us in the yet more difficult enterprise of establishing justice and fostering goodwill.

"The temptation to relax moral as well as physical effort when the war is over will be very great. But if the hungry peoples are to be fed, if their economic life is to be restored—on which our own prosperity is in turn dependent—our people must continue their self-control and be ready still for restrictions and hardships in the common interest. And the Church should be foremost in encouraging this spirit and offering examples of it. The task before our nation and its allies is too great for the natural resources of the citizens. Only through dedication to God and His purpose, only in the strength won by such dedication and the faith which inspires it, can we be worthy of the vocation to which the Divine Providence in history is pointing us.

Victory, May 8th, 1945.

The religious side of the Victory celebrations has been, it is thought, worthy of the greatness of the occasion.

His Majesty the King began his speech with the words "To-day we give thanks to Almighty God for a great deliverance." He concluded with the following memorable passage:—

"We shall have failed, and the blood of our dearest will have flowed in vain, if the Victory which they died to win does not lead to a lasting peace, founded on justice and established in good will. To that, then, let us turn our thoughts on this day of just triumph and proud sorrow; and then take up our work again, resolved as a people to do nothing unworthy of those who died for us and to make

the world such a world as they would have desired, for their children and for ours.

"This is the task to which now honour binds us. In the hour of danger we humbly committed our cause into the Hand of God, and He has been our Strength and Shield. Let us thank Him for His mercies, and in this hour of Victory commit ourselves and our new task to the guidance of that same strong Hand."

The Archbishop of Canterbury, Dr. Fisher, in a thanksgiving service broadcast from St. Paul's Church, Bedford, said our rejoicing could not be anything but sober and restrained.

"We have been wrestling," he said, "with the power of darkness itself, with a spiritual horror. We always knew it: the stark evidence of the concentration camps has shocked us into a fresh knowledge of how dark and dreadful it was. We have seen unclean things in the human heart, and that has sobered us. Looking forward, we know that if we are to reap the fruits of victory in a true peace, there is a spiritual struggle still to be won over the passions, prides, and jealousies of nations, demanding of us all ceaseless discipline, hard endeavours and high dedication." He commanded rejoicing, but without excess.

Great Thanksgiving Services were held in all Cathedrals and Churches throughout the land. Most memorable were the services held in Westminster Abbey and St. Margaret's Church, Westminster, attended by the House of Lords and the House of Commons respectively. Many Cathedrals and Churches held Services at regular intervals throughout V-E Day and they were filled with large and reverent congregations.